

BIBLICAL FASTING

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Biblical fasting is abstinence from food and perhaps other legitimate pleasures in order to concentrate on a definite spiritual problem or need. It is done in conjunction with confession of sin and prayer.

Warnings about Fasting

1. Biblical fasting is not for show (Matthew 6:16-18). God hates hypocritical religion, which is man's attempt to appear holy before other men without possessing true holiness before God. In this passage, Christ rebukes the kind of fasting that is done for the sake of appearing spiritual before men. He is not making light of the practice of fasting itself when done properly. In fact, He takes for granted that His followers will fast. He did not say "IF thou fastest," but rather, "WHEN thou fastest." And He made a wonderful and definite promise that those who practice biblical fasting will be rewarded openly by God the Father.
2. Biblical fasting is not an empty religious ritual (Luke 18:12). This is the statement of a Pharisee who was practicing religion in an attempt to justify himself before God. He observed a regular period of fasting. Nowhere, though, does the Bible require such a practice. Fasting is not a ritual observed once a week, or once a month, or prior to the Lord's Supper, etc. Fasting, rather, is something that is practiced when a special need arises and when the Holy Spirit leads.
3. Biblical fasting is not for physical health. Though various sorts of fastings may or may not promote better health, this is never the purpose given in the Bible for fasting. Many popular Christian books emphasize the importance of fasting for physical benefit, but this is not biblical fasting. We cannot say that fasting is or is not good for the health, and we cannot say it either is wrong or right to fast for health. We are saying, simply, that the Bible does not speak of fasting in light of health.
4. Biblical fasting is not an empty ascetic practice (Colossians 2:20-23). Some false teachers in Paul's day were practicing fasting because they believed it made them holy. They taught that salvation and sanctification were attained by following a list of rules ("touch not, taste not, handle not"). The Roman Catholic monastic system adopted this error. The monastics locked themselves away from society and beat themselves and starved themselves and refused to bathe or to change their clothes and many such things with the goal of "climbing the ladder" to heaven and drawing nigh to God. But this is a false gospel. Salvation is a free gift of God's grace, and sanctification and spiritual victory is not through asceticism but through obedience to the simple New Testament faith by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Fasting is an important part of the Christian life and

ministry, but we must be careful that we do not think that spirituality comes through punishing the body and observing various rituals and dietary laws. True spirituality is being in a right relationship with and fellowship with Jesus Christ.

5. Fasting does not necessarily guarantee that one's prayers will be answered. In 2 Samuel 12 we have the record of how David fasted and prayed for God to preserve the life of the child which had been conceived through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. God did not honor David's fast in that particular case. This reminds us that fasting, while an important practice in spiritual warfare, is not a guarantee that we will get what we are desiring from God. Earnest prayer with fasting does often result in the answer one is seeking, but it is no guarantee. God is always sovereign in answering prayer, and we must always submit to His will.

6. Fasting is not a matter of law but of liberty. It is a personal matter. Fasting is important and useful in Christian life and service, but it is not something that can be commanded and it is not something by which we are to judge the spiritual condition of others.

The Importance of Fasting

The importance of fasting is seen in the number of positive references in the Old and New Testaments. There are over 30 positive examples, commands, and instructions in Scripture about fasting.

Judges 20:26--Israel fasted for victory in war.

1 Sam. 1:6-7--Hannah fasted for a son

1 Sam. 7:6--Israel fasted in repentance

1 Sam. 31:13--Men of Jabeshgilead fasted in mourning for Saul

2 Sam. 1:12--David and his men fasted in mourning for Saul, Jonathan, and the fallen of Israel

2 Sam. 12--David fasted for mercy upon his child

1 Kings 21:27--Ahab fasted for mercy

2 Chron. 20:3--Jehoshaphat and Israel fasted for help and protection

Ezra 8:21-23--Ezra and the Jews fasted for help and protection

Nehemiah 1:4--Nehemiah fasted in mourning and for help

Nehemiah 9:1-2--Israel fasting in mourning and repentance

Esther 4:16--Esther and friends fasted for victory

Esther 9:3--Fasting is mentioned as having had a role in the victory

Psalms 35:13-14--Fasting in prayer and mourning

Psalms 69: 10-11--Fasting in prayer and mourning

Isaiah 58:6-8--The fast which pleases God

Jeremiah 36:9--Israel fasted for mercy

Joel 1:14; 2:12, 15--God commanded fasting and repentance

Jonah 3:5--The Ninevites fasted in repentance for mercy

Daniel 9:3--Daniel fasted for wisdom

Matthew 4:2--Jesus fasted when tempted in the wilderness

Matthew 6:17-18--Jesus promised that the Father would bless fasting

Matthew 9:14-15--Jesus said his disciples would fast

Matthew 17:21--Fasting is necessary for overcoming some demonic strongholds

Mark 9:29--Fasting is necessary for overcoming demonic powers

Luke 2:37--Fasting was part of Anna's service to God

Acts 13:2--Fasting was part of the ministry of the workers at Antioch

Acts 13:3--Ordination was accompanied by fasting Acts 14:23--Ordination was accompanied by fasting

1 Corinthians 7:5--Fasting and prayer is the only proper reason for abstinence from the marital relationship

2 Corinthians 6:5--Fasting was one way Paul approved himself as a minister of Jesus Christ

2 Corinthians 11:27--Paul fasted often

These examples and instructions regarding fasting cannot be taken lightly. We are told that the examples of Scripture are as important as are its commands--1 Corinthians 10:11; Romans 15:4. The Lord Jesus Christ is our Pattern (1 Peter 1:21), and His fasting during the temptation in the wilderness is our example, just as His prayers during the temptations in the garden are our examples. Also we are told that the Apostle Paul is to be imitated (Philippians 3:17; 4:9), and Paul put before us the example of frequent fasting (2 Cor. 11:27).

The Chief Purpose of Fasting

The Lord Jesus said that fasting is an essential part of spiritual warfare, and those who war against satanic strongholds know this to be a fact (Matthew 17:18-21)! There are indeed demonic strongholds that can be conquered by NOTHING but prayer AND fasting.

What Are Some Other Occasions When We Should Fast?

In addition to fasting to overcome demonic strongholds, following are some other occasions that call for fasting.

1. Fast when sorely tempted (Matthew 4:2).

2. Fast when wisdom is earnestly desired (Daniel 9:3).

3. Fast when God's help and protection are needed (Ezra 8:21-23; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Jeremiah 36:9).

4. Fast when victory is desired in seemingly impossible situations (Esther 4:10-17; 9:31; Neh. 1:4).

5. Fast during times of special repentance, confession, and revival (Joel 1:14; 2:12; 2:15; Neh. 9:1-2).

6. Fast when new ministries are launched and when men go forth to proclaim God's Word and battle spiritual enemies (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

7. Fast when involved in spiritual ministry (2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27)

An Encouraging Promise about Fasting (Matthew 6:17-18)

The Lord Jesus Christ made a definite promise about fasting. When one fasts in the proper manner for the proper reason -- "the Father which seeth in secret SHALL reward thee openly." This is one of the most wonderful promises in the Bible and cannot be dismissed lightly. God would not make such a promise if He did not consider fasting important. Christ never discouraged proper fasting. He condemned and corrected false practices, but never did He discourage Scriptural fasting. In fact, He took for granted that His followers would fast.

Why Does God Require Fasting?

We can't answer this question fully, perhaps, but we do know that fasting demonstrates the earnestness and desire of the heart (Hebrews 11:6).

God sees the hearts of men, but the Bible says He requires open evidence of the heart's desire--Joel 2:12. "Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning."

This is seen in Abraham's offering of Isaac. God knew that Abraham would obey and give up the beloved son, but He required Abraham to go through with the act up to the very point of driving the knife into Isaac's heart. Only then did God say, "For now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me" (Gen. 22:12).

Fasting can be seen as one way of evidencing the earnestness and sincerity of our hearts toward God in matters of prayer. We can say that such things as fasting are not necessary since God knows our hearts, but examples such as the one about Abraham and his son show that God does require evidence of our faith and earnestness.

How Long Is a Biblical Fast?

The Bible sets no specific time length for fasting. Daniel fasted 21 days. Esther and Mordecai fasted 3 days and nights. The Lord Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness. But frequently the Bible simply does not say how long people fasted. We are not told, for example, how long Ezra fasted before making the journey to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21-23).

Fasting is a matter of individual freedom under the direction of the Holy Spirit. It can be one meal or many meals, according to the need of the hour and the direction of God. Romans 14 speaks of this sort of thing and says, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5).

What Is a Biblical Fast?

A biblical fast has the following basic elements:

1. Abstinence from food and normal physical pleasures (Matthew 4:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:5).
2. Prayer (Matthew 17:21). Biblical fasting is always associated with an increased attention to prayer and communion with God. Fasting divorced from prayer is not biblical fasting.
3. Confession of sins (Daniel 9:3-6; see entire chapter). Biblical examples of fasting are often connected with periods of special repentance and confession of sins.
4. Separation from the evil things of the world and drawing nigh to God (James 4:4-10). The context of this passage is resisting the devil. It is talking about spiritual warfare, which is the main purpose of fasting. To defeat the devil, the believer must cleanse himself of evil and draw nigh to God.

There are no rigid guidelines for fasting in the Bible. In Daniel's fast of 21 days, we are told that he ate "no pleasant bread, nor flesh, nor wine" (Dan. 10:3). Apparently, Daniel did eat something, but he abstained from pleasant foods. God has not given specific instructions about fasting because it is to be a private matter between an individual and the Lord. A nursing mother, for example, would be unwise to go entirely without food for any significant length of time, because not only is she dependent upon that food, but her infant is also. People with health problems such as diabetes must be very careful about fasting. God has promised, "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye" (Psa. 32:8). This promise applies to fasting. God will guide me as to when to fast, and how long, and from what should I abstain.

MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS ATTACK THE DOCTRINE OF FASTING

The new versions make a strange attack against the New Testament teaching of fasting. Though some references to fasting remain, several significant references are removed.

Matthew 17:21--KJV "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." This entire verse is omitted or questioned in brackets in the New American Standard Version [NASV], Revised Standard Version [RSV], New International Version [NIV], New English Bible, Jerusalem Bible, and Phillips translation. The Today's English Version [TEV] puts the verse in brackets.

Mark 9:29--KJV reads "And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting." The Bible Society Greek text and the new versions based on this text omit the words "and fasting." This is true in the NIV, NASV, RSV, Living Bible, Phillips, New English Bible, and Jerusalem Bible.

These two verses about fasting are not the only references to this doctrine in Scripture, but they are the only references which specifically, directly teach the importance of fasting as an aspect of spiritual warfare. Those who have fought spiritual battles against the powers of darkness know the precious truth of what Jesus is saying in these passages. Prayer is a powerful spiritual resource, but there ARE demonic strongholds that cannot be broken by prayer alone without fasting. It is a fact, and it is a part of the Bible!

To remove these references from the Bible is folly and evil. It is equal to removing part of the essential armament from a soldier's equipment before sending him into battle.

The textual evidence in support of the references on fasting is overwhelming. It is largely a matter of the vast majority of textual witnesses on one hand (which support the fasting readings) against the flimsy, questionable testimony of the two manuscripts preferred by Westcott and Hort--Vaticanus and Sinaiticus.

Personally, I will require much stronger witness than this before allowing someone to remove these blessed Scriptures from my Bible. In fact, you will not take them from my Bible, thank you! I consider these references so important spiritually, that the removal of these two passages alone demonstrate to me the error of following the Westcott-Hort textual principles which allow the Sinaitic and Vaticanus manuscripts to overthrow the testimony of multitudes of other witnesses.

There are four other passages dealing with the doctrine of fasting which are removed in the new versions:

Acts 10:30--Here we read in the King James Version and most of the old Protestant translations in various languages that Cornelius was fasting and praying. The new versions, following the lead of the Westcott-Hort Greek text, removes the word fasting. This is true for the RSV, NASV, NIV, Living Bible, TEV, New English Bible, Jerusalem Bible, the New Berkeley Version, and Phillips.

1 Corinthians 7:5--The KJV reads, "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency." Again turning against the majority of textual witnesses, the new versions remove fasting from this important passage. This is true for all of the versions we have been checking as mentioned above.

2 Corinthians 6:5--The KJV reading, "fasting," has been changed in the new versions to "hunger." Obviously, hunger and fasting are two different things. In 2 Cor. 11:27, where the Apostle Paul gives a similar listing of some aspects of his ministry, he mentions both hunger AND fasting. We see from this that the Holy Spirit is not using these terms synonymously. This, therefore, is another attack upon the biblical doctrine of the spiritual benefit of fasting.

2 Corinthians 11:27--The KJV reading, "fastings often," is replaced in the new versions with "often without food." The comment on 2 Cor. 6:5 above applies here as well. Being hungry and going

without food does not have to be connected with the spiritual life and warfare. Going without food is not necessarily fasting. To change this reading without overwhelming proof that the King James translators were wrong--proof which modern translators do not have--is dangerous at best. The KJV reading says, "in hunger and thirst, in fastings often." A clear distinction is made between the hunger Paul often endured because of lack of food, and his frequent times of spiritual fasting. If in these two passages the Holy Spirit is referring to the apostle's spiritual battles, to spiritual fasting, which is most probable since such a distinction is made, the modern translators have done a great evil in removing this teaching through their versions.

When the reading of these six verses is taken together, a definite pattern of attack appears in the new Greek texts and versions upon the doctrine of fasting as a spiritual weapon. And this is even more serious in light of the fact that we are warned in Scripture that spiritual warfare will grow in intensity as the time of Christ's return draws near. "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. ... But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:1,13). Don't be deceived, dear Christian friend, into accepting a Bible version that removes these important spiritual weapons from your life.

The fact is that there ARE demonic strongholds that cannot be broken down without biblical fasting. While the churches are feasting, the devil runs rampant.

We have experienced the truth of this. There were many times that we have been at the point of total despair in our ministry in the idolatrous country of Nepal. I recall such an experience at the beginning of our work there. It seemed that an impenetrable dark wall stood before us. We were proclaiming the Gospel and some Hindus had shown interest; many were coming to meetings, and some had made professions of faith. But not one idolater had repented of his sin and idolatry and been born again.

Troubles were also bearing in upon us from many directions that held the potential of ending our ministry in that difficult land. The national ecumenical fellowship slandered us and called for a total boycott of our ministry. Our work was illegal and we were in constant danger of being evicted by the Nepali government. It appeared that our desire to establish a Nepali church that would glorify Jesus Christ would never be fulfilled.

We determined to have a time of prayer with fasting. It was the first time, really, that I had practiced this with such serious intent, and I must admit that I didn't find it easy. Soon thereafter a Nepali fellow came to our house and was saved in our living room soon after we met him. Then he led a friend to Christ, and the friend led his sister to Christ. All of these showed real evidence of repentance. They made a complete break with idolatry and began to serve the Lord Jesus Christ in spite of many persecutions. Soon others were saved, and the Lord brought a faithful evangelist to join hands with us as a much needed co-laborer in the ministry. Today that fellowship has grown in the midst of much hardship and poverty and has become a lively New Testament church. It has its own leadership, pays its own bills, and has zealous evangelistic, missionary vision. All of the first converts are still serving the Lord today, most in leadership positions.

Prayer with fasting is a normal part of the ministry of that church. Would the victory have been won without the fasting? Not according to the testimony of the Son of God. He said, "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting."

The wall we faced in that heathen land was a supernatural wall. The Scriptures lift the curtain that hides the supernatural realm from our eyes and identifies our foe. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12).

Many other illustrations could be given, but this is enough. We have seen what the Word of God says. We have seen the example of godly people of all ages. We have seen the example of the Son of God. We must face these things and realize that spiritual fasting is very important in the Christian life and ministry and is a practice urgently needed in our day.

We have felt the power of the enemy. We have heard his fearful roar. And we believe the warning of the Lord Jesus Christ and the many examples of the infallible Scriptures. Spiritual fasting is essential.

Praise God for the sure promise of the Bible: "But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: AND THY FATHER, WHICH SEETH IN SECRET, SHALL REWARD THEE OPENLY" (Mat. 6:17-18).

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